

Manta's mission a dual affair

I went to Forward Operating Location Manta, Ecuador, in late July to see how Airmen there fight the war on drugs. What an exciting learning experience that was.

Manta's mission is as vital to our national security as the war on terrorism, and doing it takes a total force effort. Airmen work with other American military and government agencies, the Ecuadorian government and military and American and Ecuadorian civilians to do the job.

In a nutshell, Airmen and others deploy to the "FOL" — everybody calls it that, even the Ecuadorians — to fly or support E-3 Sentry surveillance missions that detect, deter or stop drug traffickers from getting drugs to the United States. [See "Drug War Sentries," Page 18].

Airmen of Manta's 478th Expeditionary Operations Squadron support the whole process. But Lt. Col. Javier Delucca, the squadron commander until August 2007, told me Manta Airmen do more. They also help maintain regional security, spur economic growth and help the local people.

The colonel spent many hours helping local people. It gave him a lot of satisfaction. So much so, that he told me what he'll remember most about his one-year Manta tour is "... the people and interaction we have with the community. It's been overwhelming."

That's what I'll remember most about my Manta visit, too. Don't get me wrong, the FOL's counterdrug mission is exciting and vital. The Airmen doing it have the job down pat.

But seeing what Manta people do for their Ecuadorian neighbors is what really touched me. No surprise there. After all, American servicemembers build trust and

relationships with, and help, their neighbors wherever they go. I've seen it in a dozen countries. Airmen give of themselves freely to make things better for people who need help.

One of those giving Airmen is Chaplain (Capt.) Sam Bridges. To me, he epitomizes that giving spirit because he's in the thick of the Manta humanitarian effort. Seeing results drives his passion to help. So hardly a day goes by that he's not visiting one of

"It's too bad people in our own country don't give the needs of our children the same importance as the Americans who come here do," Rocio Pico told me. She has a daughter with Down syndrome at the school. "They will not forget us. They will not abandon us."

That young mother's words tugged at my

When Airmen visit the Por Amor Foundation orphanage in Manta, the children can't wait to have some playtime with their visitors. Twelve-year-old Diana, one of 14 children at the orphanage, clings to Senior Airman Lana Mills as they swing.

Tech. Sgt. Cecilio Ricardo



the orphanages, schools or other places where Airmen donate their time, efforts and compassion. [See "Volunteer spirit part of Manta culture," Page 23]

"I don't know how anybody can come here, see the way the people live, and not want to be a part of making their lives better," he said.

Ecuadorians appreciate the help. I saw that during a visit by Manta Airmen to a school for special-needs children. The Airmen's arrival caused a wave of excitement, hugs and lots of laughter. The children's eyes lit up. The parents appreciate that.

heart. What she said made me proud of the Airmen at Manta and their efforts to help others. Nobody tells them to spend their off-duty time volunteering. They do it because they want to; because they know it's the right thing to do.

Each Airman's act of kindness makes life a lot more bearable for others.

What I saw at Manta is that humanitarian actions are an integral part of the deployment. Like going to Manta means taking on a dual mission — fighting the drug war and doing good deeds.

It's good to see that's how they roll at Manta.

— Louis A. Arana-Barradas